



## Practical Tips to Make Your Competitive Grant Application More Successful

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Most foundations, trusts, corporations and governmental agencies that provide financial help are inundated with grant requests necessitating the writer to prepare a memorable, careful, and an articulate grant application. In this article, emphasis is placed on the preparation of grant applications for programs generally administered by state agencies including the California Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR). Although focus has been placed on state-administered grant applications; it is worth noting that there are many non-profit organizations providing funding for projects and programs available to local park and recreation agencies. Grants are available for projects that range from activities for at-risk youth to the acquisition of land for a trail corridor.

Undoubtedly there will be a considerable effort by local agencies and non-profits to apply for the competitive programs under both Propositions 12 and 40, so it is to your advantage to put your best foot forward on improving your chances for these grant funding sources and for many others.

### So what's a government grant anyway?

Grants have been around for many years, and more than likely someone from your agency has applied for one. In the broadest sense, grants are programs created by the state legislature, the electorate or a non-profit that provide funding for agencies or groups to provide alternative services, innovative programs, or conduct research. Most often there is a targeted end-user or beneficiary of the funds. Some programs require matching funds or may have narrow eligibility requirements.

Governmental grants have been used most frequently to finance capital projects such as the acquisition of land and development of park amenities and features. Generally maintenance and operations funding is not available either through governmental or corporation grant sources.

### Getting ready – think things through first:

When preparing a grant application for either an acquisition or development project, it is essential to take into account the on-going maintenance and operation costs of the property. Before seeking the land, it is critical to consider whether the existing operating budget can absorb these costs or where the funding will come from to appropriately maintain the property and provide the services the property will make possible to your residents. Non-profit organizations are known to provide endowments that are often relied upon to provide funding for those on-going needs through a competitive grant writing process.

***Well thought out  
research is absolutely  
indispensable to the  
grant writing process.  
It's a much better use of  
your time if you send a  
few well-developed  
applications than to  
propose several, hoping  
one will be successful.***

Assuming you have the state grant application in front of you, take time to review it carefully. Ask yourself, 'does the scope of my project best fit the criteria of this grant?' or are you trying to make your project fit the scope of the grant? Either way, look closely at the requirements of the grant application looking for the time frame, budgets, and project restrictions. Is there a match requirement, and if so, what or who are the acceptable partners? Can the match be in-lieu contributions, e.g., planning, project management and design aspects? Ask yourself if your agency is able to afford to front end the funding for the project knowing that the grant operates primarily through reimbursements? Some grant proposals require a statement of future commitment that describes how the program will be funded once the grant is terminated. The U.S. 2000 Census data can be found at [www.quickfacts.census.gov](http://www.quickfacts.census.gov).

### Preparing your grant application:

Preparing a grant application is much like doing a college term paper – follow all of the directions and you're half way there. Below is a suggested list of tips to follow when preparing your grant application. The best thing to remember is to put yourself in the place of the grant reader and ask yourself, 'Does this make sense, is it clear, have I gone into enough detail?' Try to look at the application as someone who is not familiar with how worthy or how important your project is. This will help you reword your application accordingly.

For the novice grant writer, don't be intimidated, or perhaps put off by the bureaucratic-sounding instructions in the grant application – you're not alone, many other grant writers have felt the same way; educate yourself, follow the programs' directions and ask questions of the grant administrator – you'll do fine!

- Pick a project that fits the project. Charlie Willard, Chief of the Office of Grants and Local Services offers this advice, "Good grant writing can't make a bad project good, but bad grant writing can make a good project look bad."
- Customize your submission to fit the philosophy of the grant maker. Follow their lead!
- Be thorough but keep to the length of the application as indicated by the grant provider. Make sure your application is being submitted as a 'completed' document – so many times, grants are turned in incomplete and it can make or break a tie score when it comes time for your project to be evaluated.
- Talk to a grant officer about your project. Find out if it meets their agency's criteria and take their suggestions to heart – incorporate them in your application, if possible. It also helps to establish a friendly rapport with the grant officer. Asking for clarity from a grant officer is not only a good idea, it's very smart and will ultimately save lots of time. The grant officer has knowledge of many different projects; some perhaps the same size and with similar demographics as yours. They're keenly aware of the program restrictions and will help you define your project even further.
- Identify audiences and those that would benefit from the project. Identify the results in terms related to the grantmakers' purpose.
- Identify what it is that the grant provider wants and make sure it is provided in your application. Review the legislation that created the grant program in the first place. Often,

the intent of the grant program, in terms of the targeted end-user or types facilities contemplated, is identified in the enabling legislation.

- Identify demonstrable outcome measures.
- Consider a joint venture with potential partners. A regional trail project is a good example of this type of proposal and it may help your project be more memorable to the grant evaluator.
- Develop a really strong 'Results' statement; make it clear, concise and to the point.
- Show how you came up with your preliminary budget and your funding expectations.
- Indicate how you plan to monitor the progress or results of the grant should your project be funded.
- Anticipate and provide if needed, CEQA documents, letters of support, resolutions, maps, photographs, and other required documents.
- Demonstrate that you have the resources to complete the project. Do you have a project manager to oversee the project's progress and the necessary staff on hand to administer the project?
- Demonstrate that the project is ready to move forward as soon as the funding is approved. Show that the project can be completed in a timely manner. Grant providers want to see results.
- Augment your application with maps and graphs, but be sure to keep it to the required length.
- If your application is denied, find out why.

**If the grant instructions indicate that it is to be double-spaced – then do it! Follow the instructions carefully!**

If you are applying for a competitive grant, make your application memorable:

Remember to make your grant application distinguishable with outstanding or creative characteristics that pop out to the reader. Ask yourself, 'what is it about this project that makes it extraordinary to the grant reader'? For example, is the community center going to also be used as a 'cultural resources center?', if so, indicate it in your application. What unique or unusual park features are you proposing for your new park – an in-ground spray- play feature; a docent led botanical garden? Does computer or solar technology operate your turf irrigation system? Are you proposing that your pool have solar panels? Who will the new program or project serve - school age children from a rural farming community? If possible, personalize your grant application by explaining more about who will be positively affected by the new project or program.

Help is out there – just ask:

An increasing number of organizations cannot afford to have someone on staff prepare grant applications. Often the preparation of grants can take what seems to be an inordinate amount of time. Many times, staff members will team together to come up with a winning application, or they will hire a professional grant writer/consultant to help with their project scope, research and application.

### How to mess up big time:

Now on the light side, here are some sure tips on how to *NOT* get your grant:

- Submit a project that has no hope of being project-ready when the funds materialize.
- Turn in an incomplete and ineligible application or one that is full of typos and incorrect grammar. Be as vague and as non-committal as you can possibly be. Or better yet, turn it in without a signature.
- Make it a challenge for the grant reviewer to find the required narrative or project descriptions.
- Disregard the needed environmental requirements.
- Fail to provide the matching funds or do not provide indications of partnership sources.
- Turn in documents after the deadline.

### Funding resources and references:

Other competitive grant programs administered by DPR such as the California Heritage Fund Grant Program, Land and Water Conservation Fund, Habitat Conservation Fund and the Recreation Trails Program are accessible by viewing the departments web site, [www.parks.ca.gov](http://www.parks.ca.gov). You'll be able to learn more about funding criteria, timeline, and the program guidelines through your research.

- CA Dept. of Environmental Protection Agency, Office of Environmental Education, Supports environmental education projects that enhance the public's awareness, knowledge, and skills to make informed decisions that affect environmental quality.  
[www.epa.gov/enviroed/grants.html](http://www.epa.gov/enviroed/grants.html)
- The Wildlife Conservation Board's three main functions are land acquisition, habitat restoration and development of wildlife oriented public access facilities. These activities are carried out under the following seven programs:
  - Land Acquisition Program
  - Public Access Program
  - Habitat Enhancement and Restoration Program
  - Inland Wetlands Conservation Program
  - CA Riparian Habitat Conservation Program
  - Land Conservation Matching Grants Program
  - Natural Heritage Preservation Tax Credit Program<http://www.dfg.ca.gov/wcb/index.html>

Other Funding websites:

Internet Resources for Non profits: [www.ucp-utica.org](http://www.ucp-utica.org)

Environmental News Network: [www.enn.com](http://www.enn.com)

Sustainable Conservation: [www.suscon.org](http://www.suscon.org)

David and Lucille Packard: [www.packfound.org](http://www.packfound.org)

The Thoreau Center for Sustainability: [www.thoreau.org](http://www.thoreau.org)